



Beating the Odds

On Friday June 20th, I received an email from my State Homeless Education Director, Dr. Lynda Thistle-Elliott, regarding an opportunity for a

student that had experienced homelessness who had "beaten the odds." The criteria for student selection were that they had to be high achieving, and headed to a four year post-secondary school, and had overcome the barriers homelessness can cause. One particular student immediately came to mind.

Jordan had just graduated from a seacoast area high school this past June. As the Homeless Liaison for the school district and the School Social Worker, I had been working with this young man since he entered high school as a freshman and had been profoundly impacted by his courage, work ethic, and perseverance. Truly the embodiment of the power of McKinney-Vento legislation, Jordan experienced multiple bouts of being doubled up and inadequately housed during middle and high school because of financial hardship, but had maintained his enrollment in the local schools. Despite these difficult circumstances, his persistence and character earned him the respect of all he encountered in high school and acceptance to Keene State College for the fall of 2014. Though the vetting process was significant, Jordan was chosen among a national group of candidates.

The purpose of this event was to provide young scholars that had faced challenges such as homelessness, foster care, or other high risk life situations. an opportunity to speak to federal policy makers and First Lady Michelle Obama to help them understand the barriers that disadvantaged youth face in high school and in accessing higher education opportunities. Ten students were selected. The National Association for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth (NAEHCY) sponsored Jordan's and my

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travel to Washington DC. NAEHCY wanted to highlight the strength and perseverance of these students and the importance of a caring adult and strong school connections such as a homeless liaison, guidance counselor, or teacher.

Jordan and I flew into Washington DC on the afternoon of Monday July 7th and met Barbara Duffield, Policy Director for the National Association for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth (NAEHCY), for a quick dinner, which was followed by a whirlwind tour of the Washington and Lincoln monuments and a quick stop at the New Hampshire tower of the reflection pools.

Tuesday morning arrived and Jordan and I donned our best and headed to the US Department of Education to meet with Secretary Arne Duncan. After a brief introduction from Secretary Duncan's staff, we settled in to his conference room with the students gathered around the table and their supporting adults in chairs lining the back of the room. One by one, these brave students began to pour out the stories of their lives. Homelessness, gang violence, eviction from housing projects, parental loss, substance use, foster care, PTSD of parents in military service and many other risk factors one would expect were mentioned. However, the resilience and power of the students gathered was profound. Many students mentioned sports (specifically basketball, as a motivator, but time and time again, the students mentioned that the caring and consistency of a specific adult kept them working to their potential and focused on achievement in school--a grandparent, a coach, a teacher, a foster parent, or a school counselor. As one student put it so well, "nobody makes it alone."

The students traveled by taxi to Pennsylvania Avenue and spent 90 minutes with the First Lady, again sharing their stories of resilience and triumph. Ms. Obama was her warm, friendly self and Jordan was able to go into more detail about his 13 moves between birth and high school graduation, being bullied due to always being the new kid in school, and the impact of having a connection with his homeless liaison that was always there in school supporting him. Not only were the students able to make a connection with the First Lady, but they also made connections with each other that will be an ongoing support to them as they move forward with their college careers.

This kind of an opportunity is a once in a lifetime. It was an incredible honor to represent Winnacunnet High School and the State of New Hampshire and share in the amazing stories of student accomplishments with these powerful decision makers. Most importantly, this was a wonderful opportunity for a most deserving and special young man, Jordan. We all congratulate you on your accomplishments and wish you the best as you head off to college!